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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine how minority news executives, assistant managing editors or higher, had gotten started on their newspaper careers, what their experiences had been as minorities in the newsroom, and what suggestions they had for improving the population of minority newsroom executives. Subjects, 42 minority news executives whose names were obtained from the membership lists of national minority journalists' professional associations, responded to a survey that asked about issues of race and retention. Specifically, respondents discussed the degree of racism they had encountered in their careers and were asked to elaborate on how race figured into hiring, job assignments, and advancement. Findings included the following: (1) 85.7% said they had found a great deal or some racism at the newspapers where they had worked; (2) four respondents--three females and one male--said they had found sexism to be an even greater barrier than race; (3) two-thirds of the respondents said that they felt pressure as a result of not being white in a white industry; (4) 83% of respondents said they knew of minority co-workers who had left the newspaper industry, 38% of whom identified race as an issue behind the departure; (5) one-quarter felt that racist attitudes were a reflection of the communities and society in which those newsrooms were located; and (6) 83% of respondents said they had found colleagues to be generally supportive throughout their careers, and 74% said management had been supportive. (Three tables of data are included.) (MS)

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Surviving to the Top:

A Study of Minority Newspaper Executives

By Edward C. Pease & Guido H. Stempel III
Ohio University

Presented to the Newspaper Division at the 1989 National Convention
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Surviving to the Top:

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By Edward C. Pease & Guido H. Stempel III

The few minority newspaper professionals who have made it beyond the rank-and-file to jobs of responsibility in American newsrooms paint a bleak picture for other persons of color striving toward newspaper careers. In national survey of 42 minority news executives – assistant managing editors or higher – respondents frankly discussed the racism remaining in America's newsrooms and offered prescriptions for change.

The shortage of minority newsroom executives is well known. What to do about it is not. This survey, conducted for the Minorities Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, suggests that the best answer for the newspaper wishing to do something about that shortage may lie in its own newsroom.

The status of minorities in newspapers – or their lack of significant status – has been a source of concern for the newspaper industry, which has turned increasing attention in recent years to increasing the numbers nonwhites working and making editorial decisions in American newsrooms. In 1988, approximately 28 percent of the American population was made up of persons of color: Blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and Native Americans.¹ But minorities comprised only 7.02 percent of the staffs of all U.S. daily newspaper newsrooms; 56 percent of all 1,600 dailies in America employed only whites in their newsrooms.² The proportion of minority newsroom managers was even smaller.

In a March 1988 syndicated newspaper column, Les Payne, managing editor for national and international news at *Newsday* and one of the few blacks in newspaper management, wrote, "Twenty years after Kerner, the newspaper industry remains largely segregated, within its pages and on its staffs. ... All Americans should press for change, because it is they who suffer from a narrow, ingrown, sterile press."³ Despite the expressed dedication of industry bodies such as ASNE and the American Newspaper Publishers Association to the goal of demographic "parity" in the newsroom by the year 2000, progress has been slow in increasing the population of minority journalists, especially among newspaper management.⁴

Some progress has been made, however, since release of the Kerner Commission report in 1968 and, certainly, efforts in recent years have stepped up the increase in the over-all number of minorities in America's newsrooms. But, as Payne observes, "most of these increases have been at the very largest newspapers and chains, with smaller newspapers showing almost no movement."⁵ Those papers are characterized by one Indiana newspaper executive at a Cincinnati minority job fair in 1988 who said that he had found the job candidates impressive but wouldn't offer anyone a job because no minority would want to stay in his town.⁶

Beyond rank-and-file journalists – reporters, desk editors and copyeditors – the numbers are much

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worse, however, and it is toward this limited population that this survey was directed. The membership lists of national minority journalists' professional associations – the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Asian American Journalists Association and the Native American Journalists Association – were culled for the names of newsroom managers, assistant managing editors or higher, at the country's 1,587 general circulation dailies. The result was just 45 names of persons of color.

In late March and early April 1988, those 45 newspaper professionals were surveyed by telephone for periods ranging from 15 minutes to an hour. The subject matter included information on the respondents' demographic backgrounds, education, career tracks and aspirations and views regarding racial issues in the newspaper industry. Of the 45 persons identified as newspaper managers, 42 participated in the study.

Doubtless, some were missed, but these 42 minority news executives, ranging from AMEs to publishers, represent most of the country's nonwhite newsroom managers. As Payne wrote in his March column, "One of the areas of newspaper journalism most resistant to improvement is that of promotion and elevation of blacks into decision-making positions."⁷ There aren't many newspaper executives who aren't white males.

The respondents included 31 men and 11 women. Of those, 16 men and five women were black; 11 men and three women Hispanic, and four men and three women Asian-American. No Native American news executives at general circulation dailies were identified. The respondents had spent an average of 19.7 years as newspaper professionals, ranging from six years to 37 years; male respondents had been in the business an average of six years longer than the women, 21.2 years to 15.3 years.

The survey sought to determine how these individuals had gotten started on their newspaper careers, what their experiences had been as minorities in the newsroom and what suggestions they had for improving the population of minority newsroom executives.

Beyond tracing their progress through the ranks, the survey asked about issues of race and retention. Specifically, respondents discussed the degree of racism they had encountered in their careers and were asked to elaborate on how race figured into hiring, job assignments and advancement. One question probed the reasons why other minority journalists that these professionals had known may have left the newspaper business; another sought information about pressures felt by minorities in the newsroom; yet another asked for specific recommendations for newsroom managers interested in keeping and advancing minority staffers. Finally, the respondents were asked about job offers they had received, both from competing papers and from outside the industry, and what about those offers had been tempting.

It is easy to conjure up the path to a career as a newsroom executive. It starts with work on a high school paper. Then comes college, journalism school, work on the campus newspaper, a summer internship and a newspaper job upon graduation. All 42 respondents had some of these experiences, but just five had all of them.

As Table 1 shows, the most common of these experiences for these executives was the summer

internship. Thirty-four of the 42 (81 percent) had internships while in college. That's much higher than the figure for journalism students generally, but it may not be for persons on their way to top newsroom positions.

• TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE •

Although 39 of these respondents have college degrees, only 20 majored in journalism. Thirteen did not get newspaper jobs when they finished college; four didn't get into newspapers until they'd been out of college for more than five years.

Similarly, the decision to go into newspaper work came at different times; 18 decided before college, 13 while they were in college and 10 decided after college.

Only two of the 42 said they had been recruited for their first newspaper job. Ten got their first jobs as a result of an internship; 21 applied for jobs, nine because friends had told them of openings. But 17 were recruited for their second jobs and 24 (57 percent) were recruited for the jobs they now hold.

These newspaper executives seem at least as mobile as other journalists. Only five had spent their entire careers with one newspaper and the median number of newspapers worked for was four. In other words, the great majority of these successful journalists had to go somewhere else to get an opportunity to move into newsroom management. Surely, some of them must have been good enough to move up the ladder where they were, but they apparently didn't get the opportunity.

That's one of the indications that the answer to finding more minority news executives may lie in newspapers' own newsrooms. In addition, most of the respondents who said they had known other minorities who had left their jobs did so for a better position and because they felt blocked where they were.

These 42 executives who made it through the newsroom gauntlet into management positions offered remarkably similar advice for newspapers that want to increase the number of minorities in their newsrooms, want to keep and develop those minorities staffers they already have and seek to move more minorities into management: Help minorities "feel they can get somewhere," one said. Another said, "Minorities are too often kept at a lower tier. That sends them the message they can't prosper."

"Work with them, stroke them; don't treat them differently," one said.

Further, respondents had several pointed observations about racism in the newsroom, and offered recommendations for the industry. The 42 newsroom managers' responses to seven questions regarding these issues of racism, retention and hiring follow.

• Racism in the Newsroom

Respondents were asked about the amount of racism they had witnessed in the newspapers for which they had worked. Over all, 36 of the 42 respondents (85.7 percent) said they had found a great deal or some racism at the newspapers where they had worked; six (14.3 percent) said they had encountered very little or none.

More than a quarter (10 of 36) of those who said they had encountered racism in the newsroom said that it was "reflective of society, largely generated by ignorance" or that "a newspaper as an institution is just a reflection of society." Others agreed: Although the degree and expression of prejudice varies by individual and geography, "(t)he reality is that there is a great deal of racism in society. What can you expect?" one woman editor responded. An Hispanic editor said, "Newsrooms are microcosms"; another attributed any racism to "cultural ignorance." Said one AME, "It's a subtle matter, hard to pinpoint; that's the insidious thing."

Said another, "This is the South. There are vestiges of racism that haven't died out - insensitivity."

But one black ME said the problem ran deeper: "Generally, I see a great deal of racial bias, both in news content and in newsroom hiring patterns, promotions and assignments. ... In the highest ranks of news organizations (there is) racism and insensitivity. We haven't removed all the problems." Another agreed, saying racism was a factor "both in coverage and in personnel," adding that he'd encountered some feeling that "blacks (were) taking jobs from whites." This was hardly an isolated theme; some respondents said they had been aware of attitudes from white co-workers that they had gotten their jobs, beats or promotions because of their race.

• TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE •

Four respondents -three female and one male - said they had found sexism to be an even greater barrier than race. "At this point, sexism is still the bigger battle," one publisher said. "We haven't won that one yet." One AME said that the racial lines she had encountered were the product of "middle management, which is insensitive to minorities and women; we are exceptions to the rules." Others said that their largely white and male colleagues had given them the feeling that any progress they made was "due to race."

Others suggested that whites saw them as "depriving someone of a job - they were making minorities an issue."

Another AME agreed, saying that the challenge for the nonwhite journalist in the newsroom goes a lot deeper than lip-service: "No matter what ASNE rhetoric says, there's not a lot of generosity in terms of sharing power; the buddy system is still strong in hiring. ... (there are a lot of) hard-working, capable, smart minority journalists, (but) I'm not sure we will be allowed to compete."

• Nonwhites in a white industry

There was consensus that minorities feel they must maintain "a higher standard" than their white counterparts in order to prove their worth. When asked if they felt any kind of pressure as a result of not being white in a white industry, two-thirds of the respondents (28 of 42) said this was an issue. Breaking down the responses by race, 81 percent of blacks said it was a problem, compared to 43 percent of Hispanics and 71

percent of Asian-Americans. Males seemed less conscious of race pressures than females, 61 percent to 82 percent.

Many of those who said they had felt pressure in their careers because of their race were uncertain whether that pressure was external or internal. "(They) seem to feel that blacks are taking jobs from whites," said one AME. One black ME recalled his stint as a city hall reporter covering a black mayor: In his coverage of city hall, there were "all kinds of pressures, from both blacks and whites, plus internal pressures" to perform. The implicit questions were "did you get your job because you're black? ... (and) have I hired people because of their race? There are expectations and perceptions of favoritism," he said.

This was a dominant theme among respondents when asked open-ended questions about the source of pressure they had felt and observed through their careers. "Whites expect you to fail," one said. A Southern ME agreed: "I know that I'm looked at a little harder than whites." This results in a burden to "be smart, tough," another respondent said.

"I know that I have been treated differently," a black AME said. "I have a higher standard of proof because I'm black." Another agreed: "Blacks have to work harder to prove their worth," he said. Yet another put it a different way: "Whites can get away with being bad easier than blacks," he said. "Sure," said another, "of course there's pressure – minorities must be better than the average white; it's a white environment." Said a third respondent, "The question is never put to mediocre white journalists, but any 'average' black journalist is remembered as a bad experience."

Minorities often feel like representatives of a race in a "white, golf club kind of industry," one assistant managing editor said. As a result, many minority staffers feel driven to perform better than others, especially whites, in what he called the "super-nigger syndrome" adopted by some blacks to head off perceived skepticism from white co-workers and superiors. "We have to be demonstrably better," he said. "If one black screws up, it reflects on the rest, becomes proof." Fifteen of the 42 respondents (36 percent) made similar statements, although one rejected that "higher standard" as "mostly internal, an unspoken burden of proof" that a white counterpart would not have to carry; another respondent said he "refuse(d) to accept that burden." Asked about the pressure question, one black AME said he felt that pressure "every which way. I have to work harder to get noticed, (and) that's pressure. It's a different world, a white world." But the basic question echoed by several respondents was how good was good enough: "The pressure is both internal and external, whites who expect you to fail and a drive to be better than the average white, because you're representing the race," one said.

"I feel pressure to be better, to prove myself and to clear the way for future minorities," said an AME, adding that the pressure was compounded by the fact that she felt she represented both "my race and my sex. I have to be twice as good, or three times."

Another said that he had felt conspicuous "when I was the only black; that's better now. But now I'm a leader for others" and feel more "political pressure."

• Why minorities leave the business

Although 16 percent of respondents said they didn't know of any minority co-workers who had left the newspaper industry, 83 percent said they did, and these respondents were quite clear on the reasons for the departures. Several said that non-racial issues of salary, advancement and lifestyle ("he wanted a normal life") accounted for some of the minority staffers' decisions to leave the newsroom. But many more pointed to issues of professional growth, support from superiors and co-workers, dead-end beats and expectations and "the racist system; they couldn't deal with the racist status quo."

Some of those stated reasons for leaving the newspaper business are not race-related: 69 percent of respondents pointed to "lack of opportunity" and "frustration"; 19 percent said that salary was behind why minorities they had known had left the business. Twenty-nine percent said the reason was simply the job, not racial issues. But 38 percent clearly identified race as an issue behind the departure: "cultural ignorance," said one. Others left the business because of "nonsupport, the fighting environment of the institution, for racial reasons."

Some minorities are "discouraged by lack of advancement because of their race," said one respondent. "They were told they weren't ready, but they were." One "saw nothing down the road." Said another, minorities in the newsroom feel "dead-ended, disappointed; blacks are just not treated well and they often feel they're wasting their time (for) no opportunities." Yet another cited this example: "He didn't see any potential and got no fair shake; his future was stagnant."

One respondent pointed to what he called "panic hires," saying that he had known several minority reporters who had "washed out" after having been hired to fill quotas and then "abandoned, just left in the corner," resulting in frustration, disillusionment and boredom. "Some were frustrated, felt out of place. There were some self-fulfilling prophecies and some (both white and black) believed blacks really aren't as good, and so they were just hired as part of some quota system." One assistant managing editor said that minorities often are caught between resentment from whites, who see them hired to fill quotas, and lack of opportunity once they're hired: "You can get your foot in the door, but then you're shut off in a corner," he said.

The issue of minority quota systems and job opportunities was the focus of a 1986 lawsuit brought by four blacks against the New York *Daily News*. In 1987, reporter David Hardy and three black co-workers won a multi-million-dollar decision against the paper in their suit, which charged the *Daily News* with hiring them because of their color and then abandoning them.⁸

Some minority hires equate frustration and the requirements of daily newspapering with racism and so blame racism for their lack of success, said some respondents: "(S)ome weren't very good; some were screwed by the racist system. Some saw more racism than really existed," one ME recalled. Another added, "They leave for the same variety of reasons that whites leave, although race is sometimes used as an excuse, a focal point."

But this appraisal was more typical: Many who quit "saw no opportunities, were not treated honestly, honorably, professionally. They were frustrated over institutional limitations," he said, by "what they weren't

permitted to do."

Others referred to some version of the "glass ceiling" -- some minorities "hit an invisible barrier and get no further. It's racial." Another agreed: "They can get only so high, and see limits on jobs, assignments; they think they're not considered for choice jobs." "There's a 'glass plate,'" another said. "You can see what's above you ... but can't go through it."

One respondent said, "I know one person who felt no one was listening; the responses were too slow." This perception may be institutional and not related specifically to racial issues. In 1972, Timothy Crouse wrote in "The Boys on the Bus" that, "Journalism is probably the slowest-moving, most tradition-bound profession in America. It refuses to budge until it is shoved into the future by some irresistible external force."⁹ Although Crouse was writing about American political coverage, the same might said about the industry's plodding acknowledgement of the Kerner Commission report, now 21 years old, which criticized the newspaper industry in 1968 of poor performance in hiring and coverage of minorities.¹⁰

Finally, it may be that although race is too often an issue when minorities leave the newspaper business, other issues not specific to race, such as those suggested above -- lack of opportunity, frustration and salary -- may be more important. Some research disproves the common conception that minorities are less likely than whites to remain in the newroom. In 1985, Ellis Cose conducted a retention study of minority journalists for the Associated Press Managing Editors Association and found that minorities left the industry at no greater rate than did whites. The problem, he concluded, was that there were so few minority journalists in the first place that loss of just a few seemed epidemic.¹¹

• How to keep minority staffers

Finally, the respondents offered many strategies for retaining promising minority staffers, based on their experiences. Many of those recommendations follow what are accepted as enlightened management techniques: offer employees opportunities for advancement; provide training for professional development and growth; give them feedback on their performance and pay them well for the jobs they do.

But the respondents said that these personnel management objectives seemed to be ignored more often for minority employees than for white employees; at least, that is the perception among minority staffers and managers. Another problem, as intimated above, is that both white and nonwhite staffers must know that they are hired for their qualifications and not to fill any kind of quota: "Decide you want that person," said one ME, "not that minority. Don't just put a minority body in that seat."

In answers to an open-ended question asking for "advice for editors who are trying to keep minority journalists from leaving their newspapers," recommendations fell into seven distinct categories: opportunities, treatment, involvement, stereotyping, feedback, support and salary. (See Table 3.)

• TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE •

"Challenge them," said one ME. "Don't be afraid to talk straight. Mainstream them and don't pigeonhole them. Force interaction with the rest of the staff and give them some counseling on their job performance and your expectations. And give them opportunities to learn and advance." Another agreed that challenges, "tough love," not special treatment, was the key: "Kick their asses and take names," he said.

One managing editor said newspapers shouldn't try to keep minority staffers. "Don't," he said. "Minority journalists are going to move around just like any white. Doing so (trying to keep them) means they are a 'chosen,' which is not fair to others on the staff." Even-handedness seemed to be a key: "Develop your minority staff just as you would any promising candidate," another ME said. "Give them as good a ride as anyone else in the newsroom." But one ME said that because "minorities are underrepresented, they deserve some extra attention." Other respondents were sensitive to the appearance of special concessions because of race, which could breed resentment and false expectations in the newsroom: "I'm not talking about special treatment because of race, just make sure minorities aren't overlooked."

Others indicated that such even-handedness, though seemingly obvious, was not common: "Black concerns about career are often met combatively," one woman said. "I challenge top management to be willing to take the same chances, to give the same opportunities, to use the same standards with minorities and women as with others."

Because most media managers are white males, a conscious effort must be made to be fair and balanced with employees, others said: "Lack (of feedback) is greater among blacks than whites – editors help whites, because people are more forthcoming with people who are like themselves. There's a cultural barrier." "It's true," said another. "Even after all these years, I feel that whites are uncomfortable with blacks; they perceive us as inferior."

• Conclusion

The recommendations and observations of these 42 minority news executives are direct and pointed. On the one hand, retaining and developing talented minorities into positions of responsibility involves no different techniques than any manager would employ in bringing along any promising staffer. But what seems clear is that minorities do not generally get the same kind of consideration as their white co-workers; this lack of even-handedness seems in some cases accidental, or at least unconscious, but often racial, these managers say.

White managers should be aware of the extra barriers – both real and imagined – that minorities must surmount in order just to keep up with their white colleagues. There is little dispute that more minorities must be brought into the newspaper industry and helped to rise through the ranks. As one Texas editor said, "You don't drive a car, don't read a book, with one eye covered. Without a newsroom that reflects your community, you're covering that community with partial vision."

Racism exists in most newsrooms, 36 of 42 respondents said, and more than a quarter of those said that attitudes were a reflection of the communities and society in which those newsrooms were located. On

the other hand, 83 percent of respondents said they had found colleagues to be generally supportive through their careers and 74 percent said management had been supportive. Communication seems to be the key, they say; do newsroom staffers, especially minorities, know how they are viewed by management? Do co-workers understand how other staffers are viewed? The old truism about newspapers is that no one gets feedback unless it's bad. This kind of management style, not uncommon, works most severely against minority staffers, who feel that they start at least a step behind in an industry where they may feel wanted, but for the wrong reasons.

As one respondent said, "Realize that minorities in the newspaper business are extremely valuable assets to be utilized and rewarded - not just with pay, but with opportunities for advancement, to change the newsroom and make a difference about news coverage."

Surviving to the Top:
A Study of Minority Newspaper Executives

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TABLE 1: Early Journalistic Experiences of Top Newsroom Executives

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Worked on high school publications	19	45
Worked on college newspaper	20	48
Majored in journalism in college	20	48
Had newspaper internship while in college	34	81
Took newspaper job right out of college	29	69

TABLE 2: Minority Newspaper Managers' Perceptions of Job Climate for Minorities, by Racial Group.

	<i>Total</i>		<i>Black</i>		<i>Hispanic</i>		<i>Asian-American</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Had support of co-workers	35	83%	17	81%	12	86%	6	86%
Had support of management	28	67	13	62	9	64	6	86
Experienced great or some racism	36	86	19	90	11	79	6	86
Felt pressure as minority in newsroom	28	67	17	81	6	43	5	71
Known minorities who left business	35	83	19	90	13	93	3	43
Offered another newspaper job	27	64	15	71	10	71	2	29
Considered accepting new job	15	56	8	38	6	43	2	29
Offered job outside newspapers	17	41	7	33	7	50	3	43
Considered accepting outside job	9	21	4	19	4	29	1	14
	N	42	21		14		7	

TABLE 3: Minority News Executives' Recommendations for Developing Minority Staff Talent

	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Offer opportunities for growth/advancement/training/development	32	76
Treat them "the same as anyone"	17	41
Don't exclude/segregate them	13	31
Don't pigeonhole/stereotype them	12	29
Provide feedback	11	26
Provide overt support	7	17
Pay them well	6	14
